

Thine or mine

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Herman Melville lived and worked with Nantucket whalers before writing “Moby Dick.” The authentic details make the book alive and exciting. However, the book carries an older, sadder theme which tugs at the reader’s heart.

Captain Ahab was once a man of faith, but now he is physically and morally diminished. He has a leg crafted from whale bone, and a scar on his face from a lightning bolt.

Ahab, who is from a peaceful Quaker background, has come to see Moby Dick, the whale who took his leg, as the embodiment of evil. His response is to pursue the animal with an ever-growing, ever-devouring hatred.

Also in the book, we meet Ahab’s counterpart before he and the book’s narrator set sail. Father Mapple is another imposing figure—an ex-whaler turned priest, also haunted by his past on the high seas. However, Mapple turns away from hatred. The lowliest sinner, he is in awe of a God who can love a man like him.

Like the two aspects of man, the fallen and the forgiven, Mapple and Ahab are the same, but also very different.

At the end of his sermon, Father Mapple refers to the delight of the man who, with his last breath can say, “I have striven to Thine, more than to this world’s or mine own.” Then he stays, bows his head in reverence while the congregations shuffles out.

While on the other hand, Ahab proudly displaying the conceit of earthly man, thinks himself to be the master of his own fate, even though his “topmost greatness” lies in his “topmost grief.”

Refusing forgiveness for the creature or himself, Captain Ahab flings defiance with his last harpoon. Ahab says to Moby Dick, “From hell’s heart I stab at thee; for hate’s sake I spit my last breath at thee.” The harpoon pierces the whale, but the rope tangles around Ahab’s neck.

It is in each one of us to be Ahab. But we might also be Father Mapple. “What makes the difference?” you ask. It’s not the lives we lead. Both Ahab and Mapple had similar lives.

The difference is what we choose to do with our failings, our sins, our nightmares. We can stand on our own strength, defying them as they drag us to the depths of hell; or, by God’s grace we can kneel and offer them to God who will deliver us even from the depths of the sea to the “topmost of His love”—an eternal life in God’s heaven.